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SUBJECT: INL-FUNDED COUNTERNARCOTICS TASK FORCE UNIT DELIVERS
RESULTS

REF: A) 06 Hanoi 3016 B) 06 Hanoi 748

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Counternarcotics Task Force Unit (TFU) in Son La Province, set up as part of an INL-funded UNODC project, plays a key role in coordinating interagency efforts in the province's fight against drug trafficking. Although the project concluded in December 2006 (Ref A), the coordination mechanism established under the project has been institutionalized and the TFU continues to produce significant results. These include previously non-existent information sharing among law enforcement agencies, proactive measures to detect drug trafficking such as surveys of trafficking routes, a higher level of arrests and three times more heroin and ATS seizures compared with pre-TFU levels. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 5, Poloff met with Le Trong Loan, the Director of the Son La Joint Counternarcotics Task Force Unit (TFU) established under the UNODC G-55 counternarcotics program. Also attending the meeting were Vu Xuan Luc, Deputy Chief, Counternarcotics Surveillance Office, Son La Provincial Border Army and Vu Xuan Dinh, Officer, Son La Provincial Customs Department. The TFU was established in 2004 as part of a three-year INL-funded UNODC project to build GVN capacity in the fight against drug trafficking. (Ref B provides additional background on the Son La TFU.) The project concluded in December 2006.

Son La on the Frontline in the Drug War

¶3. (SBU) According to Loan, Son La Province is recognized as a "complicated drug hot spot," both within the Northwest region and nationally. The province's drug problem includes both transit of drugs from Laos to points onward and local consumption, Son La having one of the highest rates of addiction in the country. Although the province used to have one of the highest rates of opium cultivation, Loan said the GVN's poppy eradication efforts have reduced cultivation to a small area.

¶4. (SBU) Prior to the creation of the TFU in 2004, the Customs, Border Guards and counternarcotics police forces, working independently, investigated roughly 500 cases annually, involving the arrests of 600 offenders. Despite these efforts and dozens of drug trafficking-related death sentences handed down annually, Loan said the drug problem in Son La Province continued unabated. Provincial authorities took additional steps, including: increased drug awareness education, more training for counternarcotics police, more referrals of drug addicts for treatment, poppy eradication efforts and targeting of illicit drug points-of-sale. It was because of Son La's acute drug problem, and the province's determined counternarcotics efforts, that the province was chosen by the GVN and UNODC to host a TFU.

¶5. (SBU) During the three years of the project, the province investigated 2,000 cases involving 3,000 offenders. The project increased the interdiction capacity of law enforcement forces,

resulting in the seizure of 174 kilograms of heroin, 34 kilograms of opium and 23,000 ATS tablets. Project training in interdiction and arrest techniques enhanced the capability of border guards and counternarcotics police in border districts to make arrests.

16. (SBU) Loan provided examples of "typical" seizures that took place during the term of the project. In November 2004, an arrest involving 10 offenders resulted in the seizure of 31 cakes of heroin (roughly 10.85 kilograms of heroin). The perpetrators confessed to having previously trafficked a total of 745 cakes of heroin (roughly 260 kilograms) to Hanoi for local consumption. A January 2006 case resulted in the arrest of 17 offenders and the seizure of 4.5 kilograms of heroin and 1,000 ATS tablets, as well as grenades and other weapons. These offenders also confessed to having previously trafficked 34 kilos of heroin to neighboring Hoa Binh Province. Loan said the TFU had worked on many cases involving 5-6 offenders with seizures in the range of 3.5-7 kilograms of heroin. In January 2005, Customs officials received a tip about an army driver transporting heroin into the province. Customs passed the information to the provincial counternarcotics police and an arrest was made netting four kilograms of heroin. Prior to the project, Customs and counternarcotics police had never shared information in this way.

TFU Continues to Operate Post-Project Completion

17. (SBU) Since the UNODC project wrapped up in December 2006, the police, border guards and customs forces in Son La continue to coordinate counternarcotics efforts through the TFU mechanism. During the first five months of 2007, the Son La TFU was involved in 200 cases involving more than 300 offenders, and seizure of 21 kilograms of heroin, 6 kilograms of opium and 246 ATS tablets. In February, the Border Guards provided information to the TFU that

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resulted in the arrest of two traffickers with five kilograms of heroin, again an example of information sharing that did not occur prior to the TFU, said Loan.

18. (SBU) In a separate meeting, UNODC Program Officer Troels Vester reported that, despite difficult circumstances, the performance of the Son La TFU has been outstanding. One of the team members of the TFU lost two fingers last year when he was shot in the hand by a drug trafficker upon arrest. On a different occasion, the TFU encountered personnel mines used for defense by a group of drug traffickers. Given its lengthy, rugged border with Laos, the intensity of Son La Province's fight against drug trafficking shows no sign of abating.

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